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ABSTRACT

The presence of increasing numbers of students from the People's Republic of China in American graduate and professional schools provides the opportunity for a natural experiment testing one broadly-accepted explanation of gender differences in American context. A study was conducted to examine whether these students, arriving from an educational system in which pedagogic philosophy and political ideology emphasize group rather than individual achievement, experience in American institutions the same conflicts as American women are hypothesized to experience when individualistic achievement striving comes into conflict with affiliative needs. This preliminary study involved qualitatively rich interviews with seven female and six male Chinese graduate students from the People's Republic. An analytic model in which prior socialization and the perceived attitudes of peers toward achievement striving act upon the importance the individual places upon personal versus group achievement was assessed. Subjects were found to be highly achievement-oriented, with men exhibiting somewhat lower levels of personal achievement orientation and somewhat higher levels of peer orientation than women. A modest but consistent tendency for those who rated their own achievement highly to report a higher level of positive accommodation and a lower level of anxiety than students who did not rate their achievement highly was observed. No evidence was found of a relationship between group orientation and adjustment and accommodation measures. (Author/NB)

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Exploring the Origins of Women's Conflicts in Achievement Striving: A Comparative Look to the East

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Abstract

The presence of increasing numbers of students from the People's Republic of China in American graduate and professional schools provides the opportunity for a natural experiment testing one broadly-accepted explanation of gender differences in American context. Do these students, arriving from an educational system in which pedagogic philosophy and political ideology emphasize group rather than individual achievement, experience in American institutions the same conflicts as American women are hypothesized to experience when individualistic achievement striving comes into conflict with affiliative needs? This paper reports a preliminary study based upon qualitatively rich interviews with 13 university students from the People's Republic. We assess an analytic model in which prior socialization and the perceived attitudes of peers toward achievement striving act upon the importance the individual places upon personal vs. group achievement. In turn, we postulate that those characterized by the greatest identification with group achievement will evidence the greatest difficulty in accommodating to graduate and professional study, as evidenced by measures of anxiety and adjustment. We find our participants to be highly achievement oriented, with men exhibiting somewhat lower levels of personal achievement orientation and somewhat higher levels of peer orientation than women. We observe a modest but consistent tendency for those who rate own achievement highly to report a higher level of positive accommodation and a lower level of anxiety. We do not find evidence of a relationship between group orientation and our adjustment and accommodation measures.

Exploring the Origins of Women's Conflicts in Achievement Striving: A Comparative Look to the East

We report on a preliminary study designed to explore a number of questions suggested by our reading of theoretical literature on women's achievement orientations and conflicts, and by our experience as educators and academic administrators with students from the People's Republic of China now studying in the United States. The theoretical question derives from one broadly accepted conceptualization of the origin of ambivalence toward achievement striving among American women. Do students arriving from the People's Republic, from an educational system in which pedagogic method and political ideology emphasize group rather than individual achievement, experience in American institutions the same conflicts as American women are hypothesized to experience when individualistic achievement striving comes into conflict with affiliative needs?

This report first lays out the conceptual problem and the research opportunity presented by Chinese students studying in American institutions. We then briefly describe observations derived from a perliminary study designed to explore the feasibility of this research approach and to develop measures appropriate to futher work. This preliminary study is based upon qualitatively rich interviews with 13 university students from the People's Republic. We conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of this research for assessment of the fear of success thesis for American women.

Conceptual Background:

The Etiology of Achievement-Related Conflicts in American Women

Considerable research has appeared in the past twenty years addressing gender differences in orientation toward achievement striving for American men and women. A variety of evidence indicates that American women are less achievement-oriented than American men, when achievement is defined as the disposition to find gratification in successful competition with standards of excellence through one's own efforts (Veroff, et al., 1975) and measured in terms of individualistic orientations and accomplishments. Without reviewing the debates surrounding this work, it seems to us fair to assert that the balance of evidence available substantiates the view that American women are less likely than American men to evidence high levels of self-perceived personal efficacy and internal control, are less interested in performance that requires assertion of power, control, and autonomy, especially at the cost of affiliation and acceptance by others, are more likely to recognize negative consequences of achievement striving, and are more likly to see success as a consequence of luck or ease of task and failure as evidence of lack of ability or failure of self.

Studies of equally mathematically gifted male and female high school students, for example, have found that as these students enter college, women are less likely to continue in math and science because they set inordinately high standards for themselves, taking failure to meet those high standards as evidence of personal inability and attributing success to extra-personal factors. Men on the other hand are likely to continue regardless of academic performance, attributing failure to external factors such as a bad day or an unfair instructor.

Parallel work has explored not only the developmental origins of these contrasts but also the structural factors acting upon women's self-definitions and motivational orientations. As Mira Komorovski (1946) observed first in the 1940's, American women are subject to powerful cultural contradictions as they mature and enter adulthood. As children and adolescents, girls are likely to seek and gain social recognition and approbation from teachers, parents, and peers for being, among other things, "good" students -- neat, compliant and studious, earning good grades. As girls pass through adolescence and enter the early years of adulthood, the external referent changes, and girls discover that their academic accomplishments come in conflict and threaten those of their male classmates, who are of course potential spouses. College women come to recognize that college men do not appreciate intellectual vigor and self-assertion. Further, there is evidence that faculty and administrators as well also reinforce women's taking a back seat to their male colleagues in and out of class in any number of ways expressed in attitudes, expectations, and behavior (Sadker and Sadker, 1982).

We would like to think that this is changing, and indeed it is, but popular conceptualizations of feminine roles continue to be conservative in this regard, forcing many women to view personal achievement and career as conflicting with marriage and parenthood. Matina Horner (1972) has characterized the underlying personal ambivalence as "fear of success" -- the recognition that achievement striving can come in conflict with affiliative needs. While her original thesis and the measures she employed to define the fear of success motivational construct have been severely questioned, the conflicts women experience between career and parenting (or

work and home) remain the topic of both popular and professional discussion.

We describe these theories as structural or sociocultural because they emphasize the ways in which social expectations, socialization, and role definitions come to be expressed in individual-level motivational orientations and conflicts. Such a view stands counter to a personality-based model which posits fundamental, personality-based differences between men and women, although it doesn't necessarily reject the operation of personality-based differences. This explanation posits a developmental etiology for gender differences in achievement motivations and ambivalences in which gender-differentiated and culturally-grounded patterns of socialization interact with socially structured situational constraints and requirements in later life.

The sociocultural components of this explanation rest upon the type of achievement mode characteristic in social context. In the American case, definitions of success are socially and culturally grounded in one that suggests and reinforces personal agency and reinforcement of personal accomplishments. While intra-cultural comparisons are useful in establishing the range of variation with respect to background variables that might mediate this process, inter-cultural comparisons allow more powerful tests of the structural vs. personality-based explanation. Spcifically, inter-cultural comparisons permit us to compare societies which differ on those cultural and structural factions thought to differentiate men's and women's achievement motivation, thus allowing us to separate observation of the influence of these factors and underlying dimensions of personality and individual difference.

Observation of educational systems in socialist and communist societies suggest one such possible line of research. Ideal-typically, socialist and communistic models of education have emphasized group-centeredness and self-actualization through achievement of corporate or group-structured goals. This view of educational principles in communistic countries, described for the USSR as early as the 1950's by Alex Inkeles (1961), is consistent with our own observations for schools and students in Cuba and China. This stands in marked contrast to the American model of schooling. Where American students are for the most part encouraged to compete and are individually rewarded, punished, graded, and promoted, Cuban and Chinese students are, in officially-sanctioned pedagogical practice, training for participation in group activities and tasks, and rewarded, at least through the years of early schooling, for group achievement. We cannot attest to the effectiveness of such training, but note the striking contrast to the western approach.

The group-focused model suggests a strong normative pressure toward conformity with group expectations and goals in ways that parallel in a striking manner the factors of women's early socialization and later role expectations of greatest relevance to our discussion: early socialization to external referents and mediation, conformity to others' evaluations of self, high need for affiliation, and orientation toward group and others. If these variables substantively account for the achievement-related conflicts women experience when placed in individualistic achievement-oriented settings in adult life, then we should observe some of the same conflicts for Chinese students entering directly graduate training in the United States. Confronted with powerful expectations for individual

accomplishment -- papers, tests, demands to participate in class -- and conditioned by prior socialization to value inter-personal reliance and affiliative relationships, do Chinese students experience the same ambivalence toward personal achievement and conflict in motivational orientations which are thought to characterize American women? The presence of increasing numbers of students from the People's Republic of China in American graduate and professional schools provides the opportunity for a natural experiment testing one broadly-accepted explanation of gender differences in American context.

Research Questions

Our research model postulates a direct relationship for our students between the importance placed by an individual upon achievement of personal vs. group goals and subsequent accommodation to personal achievement expectations. We anticipate two factors acting upon the relative importance of personal and individual goals. Prior schooling characterized by an authority (other) based vs. student (ego) centered instructional mode should be reflected in lower levels of inner- or self-directedness, hence a lesser tendency to rate personal achievement highly relative to achievement of group goals. Similarly, a peer reference orientation recognizing negative as well as positive consequences of achievement-striving should have the same effect. We would expect that the size, structure, and habitual pattern of use of support networks should both influence and reflect personal orientations, at the same time that these patterns would carry over into new living situations. Degree of accomodation to the high levels of personal achievement expectation characteristic of graduate study should be reflected in low levels of generalized anxiety and situational anxiety, and a balance

of positive to negative accommodations and adjustment problems. These relationships are briefly summarized in Figure 1.

Method

Participants

Participants were selected from graduate students who had been at their institution for one to two years. Our objective was to interview as many students from the People's Republic as fit this description, attempting to balance the participant pool with respect to gender. Participants were drawn from two institutions, one a public and the other a private university, both of moderate size.

Participants consist of seven Chinese women and six Chinese men. These individuals range in age from 23 to 34, averaging approximately 29. They are of generally priveleged, urban backgrounds, their parents having typically the equivalent of some university-level education and being engaged in professional or white collar occupations. Informants averaged a little over a year in the United States, most having just completed their first year of graduate study.

These individuals represent the cohorts born largely in the decade of the 1950's, experiencing the Cultural Revolution in their period of primary schooling. For most, these were years during which their educations were significantly disrupted. Most spent this period in the countryside as laborers and were educated as were other laborers' children. Subsequently, most entered secondary or post-secondary schools on the basis of nation-wide testing and placement. None among them is government-

sponsored, which means that they have sought out their opportunity for further education abroad on their own (or their family's) initiative, competing successfully for fellowship funding and/or working for support. All but one come from professional or technical-managerial homes and no doubt a background of relative social privelege. Although four now have family or spouses in the United States, all seem to have made the transit themselves. These students appear therefore highly motivated and independent, an important caveat to bear in mind through analysis.

Instruments

Criterion Variable: Importance of Personal and Group Achievement. We postulate that the primary explanatory construct underlying structural explanations of women's achievement conflicts is early socialization toward external referents and standards of achievement and other-oriented or affective orientations toward success and accomplishment. We assessed the degree to which the prior educational experience and peer orientation of our Chinese informants can be characterized in this way through the use of four types of measures:

1. The degree to which prior education can be described as authority (other) based vs. student (ego) centered was assessed through an inventory of items descriptive of the instructional styles of teachers and response styles of fellow students through their years of secondary schooling. Illustrative items include "Did the teacher . . . usually lecture? encourage discussion? speak to students by name?"; "Did students . . . ask many questions? volunteer answers in class? help each other?"

2. The degree to which peers recognized negative as well as positive consequences of achievement striving was assessed by asking informants about how most of their friends in their home country felt about a series of statements expressing negative or positive consequences of achievement striving. Examples include: "For every winner, there are many unhappy losers", "When you're successful, everyone respects you", and "Successful people are often sad and lonely."
3. The relative value placed on own vs. group achievement was assessed through use of direct questions: "In general, how important was it to you for the whole class to do well? . . . for you to do well?"
4. The size, structure, and habitual use of support networks were assessed by asking participants whether they would most likely turn to family, fellow students or workers, other friends, or teachers or other professionals in a variety of circumstances: to talk about a personal problem, to do a small personal favor, to relax and have a good time, and to ask advice about the future. Additional items asked the respondent to estimate the number of individuals in each referent group.

Dependent Variable: Degree and Mode of Accommodation to Individualistic Achievement Norms. We postulate that successful accommodation to individualistic achievement norms will be evidenced in report of a greater number of positive experiences and accommodations than negative experiences and adjustment problems and in low levels of both generalized and situational anxiety. We anticipate that prior patterns of reliance on support networks will be reflected in those established in the new situation. These concepts were operationalized as follows:

1. Positive accommodation, the balance of positive experiences and accommodations to negative experiences and adjustment problems, was assessed through use of an inventory of self-reports on experiences since arrival. Typical items include "I think about my family often", "I worry about failing", "I sometimes feel sad and lonely", and "Many people help me", "I am usually very happy", "I have many American friends."
2. Generalized and situational anxiety were assessed through use of the Spielberger "Self-Evaluation Questionnaire". Respondents were asked to describe how they felt "right now" and how they "generally" feel with respect to an inventory of items. Typical items include: "I feel satisfied with myself", "I make decisions easily", "I feel self-confident" and "I have disturbing thoughts", "I feel inadequate", "I feel nervous and restless."
3. Size, structure, and use of support networks were assessed through use of a network mapping task. Informants were asked to list all individuals whom the informant felt he or she "could rely on to help you" within each of four categories: family and relatives, fellow students and workers, other friends, and professors and other university people. Informants were further asked to identify those he or she would most likely to turn to in each of four support domains: to talk about a personal problem, do a small personal favor, relax and have a good time, and ask advice about the future. Networks were assessed for size, structure, and patterns of use. This exercise parallels the retrospective report on the established support network in the student's home context.

Control and background variables. These include a variety of items on family background, household structure, prior schooling, and educational plans. Informants are classed by gender for purposes of analysis.

Procedure

Informants first completed a five page, self-administered questionnaire consisting largely of objective-response items requiring participants to check items or scale positions. Informants then met with an interviewer (one of two female American graduate students), who reviewed the questionnaire, using it to probe within each area. The interviewer then guided the informant through the network mapping exercise. The interviewer concluded the session by administering the state/trait anxiety task, providing clarifications of unfamiliar words and phrases in the latter.

Results and Discussion

We describe our observations by first summarizing modal patterns and gender differences for indicators of our criterion variable, the importance of group vs. individual achievement. In doing so, we implicitly test the validity of our starting assumptions regarding the effects of prior education for these students. We then summarize our observations for indicators of our dependent variable, degree and mode of accommodation to individualist achievement norms in American context. The following section assesses the degree to which these observations fit the underlying conceptual model. Our underlying model assumes that any gender differences operate through the agency of the criterion indicators. We assess the

degree to which this is true by examining the data for gender differences at each stage of analysis.

Importance of group vs. individual achievement

Prior education: authority-based vs. student-centered instruction. In general, informants received their secondary schooling in large urban comprehensive schools, with classes averaging 50-60 students. Informants report an instructional mode which is readily characterized as authority-based, in which instructors usually lecture, use questions in a didactic manner, discourage discussion, command respect, and are thought seldom to make mistakes. In turn, students seldom ask questions or volunteer answers. However, within this context, instructors were also perceived as helpful and concerned -- especially in contrast with American professors, who are described as frequently too busy with research and other work to answer questions and give extensive time to individual students.

relative importance of own vs. group achievement. In turn, students described their relations with other students as generally supportive, with friends literally sharing work and discussing work after class. However, 10 of the 13 informants also characterize students as competing strongly for grades. Further, only 2 of 12 stated that it was very important for them personally that the class do well (data not available for one individual on this task). In general, while most (9) agreed that it was at least somewhat important for the class to do well, an equal number reported that it was very important to them that they do well, individually, with all reporting self achievement more than (8) or equally important to (4) collective achievement. In short, although we have some sense of corporate responsibility, we are more struck by the high valuation placed on personal

achievement. In this small group, our women are in fact more achievement oriented than the men, with 6 of 7 giving first place to own achievement and as a group scoring group achievement well below their 4 male counterparts.

Peer reference orientation: recognition of positive vs. negative consequences of achievement striving. In general, our informants report that their peers recognized both positive and negative consequences of achievement striving, in equal proportion. Not unexpectedly, education particularly is valued by peers as a route to respect and importance, but peers are also reported to believe that an individual's success frequently occurs at the expense of others, a negative consequence. In general, the negative aspects of achievement striving are those which reference group rather than individual. Although the number of informants is too small and the informant pool too selective to support extensive analysis, women do as a group report a more positive peer reference orientation than do men. This is accounted for in large part by men's more uniform report of friends' agreement with the item, "If you work hard at doing something better than anyone else, you might lose friends" (4 of 6 men in agreement, 1 of 7 women). This is consistent with our previous finding that women place great importance on their own performance.

Support networks. Clear gender differences appear in the size and structure of men's and women's support networks reported for this period of secondary schooling. Men more uniformly indicate larger numbers of support individuals in three of the four categories queried (fellow students and co-workers, other friends, teachers and professionals), with the total number estimated 50% greater than that of women. Most strikingly, men uniformly report larger numbers in the category of fellow students and workers than do

women. In contrast, women tend (4 of 6) to report numbers of family and relatives at least equal to the numbers reported in other categories, and relatively few in the categories of fellow students and co-workers. This gender difference shows up clearly in responses to the question about use of these support individuals. While men uniformly prefer fellow students, workers, and other friends in each support domain (talking about personal problems, requesting small favors, having a good time, seeking advice about the future), 6 of 7 women would utilize family members.

In summary, we find our informants conform to expectations only partially, and in highly qualified respects. While certainly recognizing corporate responsibilities and consequences, they appear highly achievement oriented. To the extent that gender differences are found, they reverse the direction of difference one would expect for Americans of similar background and experience. Men appear more peer-oriented and somewhat less achievement oriented than women. Women exhibit high levels of personal achievement motivation, while looking less toward peers than toward family for social support. These informants are of course in no way representative of all university students, but do offer interesting insight into Chinese education and the flow of Chinese students to the west.

Degree and mode of accommodation: American graduate study

Adjustment. In general, informants report a fairly high level of positive adjustment in the 12 to 18 months since arrival on their respective campuses. Most report that they think about their families often and that they sometimes feel sad and lonely, men and women equally. Few report that they have many American friends or friends from their home country. Yet 10

of the 13 report also that they usually feel welcome and indicate a high level of independence and success in learning how to do things. Academic adjustment seems rarely perceived as a primary problem or a particular anxiety -- in fact, several note that they are better prepared than their American classmates in their area of specialization and are hindered primarily by difficulty with English and uncertainty regarding appropriate norms for class behavior. No particular gender differences are apparent.

General and situational anxiety. Informants score somewhat higher than a comparable domestic population might on both general and situational anxiety, and higher on the generalized than the situational measure. Women score lower than do men on both measures. In part, this may reflect their greater ease with the female interviewers, although these tasks were reserved for the conclusion of the interview in order that the interviewer might have maximum opportunity to establish rapport. For both men and women, there is a tendency for those scoring highest on the anxiety measures also to score negatively on the adjustment measures. Language is indicated again as a problem, with the high anxiety scorers in both gender groups reporting difficulty with English (6 of the 8 who did). These are also among those few who report anxiety with respect to the possibility of failure and uncertainty with respect to instructors' expectations and classroom behavior. We see therefore evidence that anxiety and greater difficulty in adjustment may relate to command of language specifically, regardless of possible relation to other background variables.

Support networks. In the time since arrival on their American campuses, our informants have been remarkably successful in establishing comprehensive support networks, although most report that they wish they had

further help with particular types of problems, such as learning appropriate norms of academic behavior. All but one male list multiple individuals in all support categories except family -- fellow students, other friends, professors and other university personnel. Although the numbers appearing in each category are smaller than those reported for their years of secondary schooling, the networks are more extensively used, with single individuals within each category tending to serve multiple functions. Further, informants report a preponderance of non-Chinese in each category and domain. Thus, although fellow Chinese provide no doubt valued opportunity for cultural contact and intimacy, these individuals do not exclusively rely upon compatriots in meeting their needs. As previously mentioned, men report larger numbers of support individuals, although the difference between men and women in these totals is not nearly as large as previously, and the numbers for men approach those reported by women for their home country. The principal gender difference lies in use of these personal networks. Men continue to seek out peer relationships, preferring fellow students and using professors and other university personnel as if they were peers. Women, on the other hand, tend to be much more diffuse in their use of support people, utilizing individuals across all categories and domains. Women do not as much as men physically center their networks on campus, and are more likely to cite non-University affiliated individuals and to look to these individuals more for support. Interestingly, although in their home country women were much more kin-centered than men, separated from their families men and women equally report missing these relatives.

Data from the American comparison group provides an interesting contrast. Not surprisingly, Americans cite far greater numbers of

individuals within each "helping" category. However, when viewed as support networks, American use of these individuals is more segmented (individuals less frequently play multiple support roles) and diffuse (support reliance is spread across a large number of individuals). Our Chinese participants point to these differences repeatedly by observing that Americans use the term "friend" much more casually and generally than they themselves do. For our Chinese participants, trust in others is not freely extended, and there appears a strong tendency to privatize needs combined with a deep reluctance to seek assistance and rely on others.

Summary: Accommodation and Achievement Orientations

The underlying conceptual model is developmental and should be assessed with longitudinal data. We recognize that the retrospective and quasi-projective nature of our procedure is not ideal. We believe, however, that we were successful in communicating the nature of these tasks to our informants, and feel that the multiple measures adopted and the richness of the qualitative material derived from the interview partially compensate.

When we examine the 13 case studies reported here for evidence of the relationship between accommodation to personal achievement expectations and the prior importance of personal *vs.* group achievement, we find a weak but consistent tendency for those who rate own achievement highly to report a higher number of positive relative to negative accommodation and adjustment problems, and to score very slightly lower on general and situational anxiety. Attaching greater or lesser importance to group achievement does not bear any relationship to either of these measures.

The evidence with respect to support networks is more complex. We find that, in the U.S., individuals citing a larger number of individuals across support domains score appreciably higher on adjustment, particularly among women. In part, this is because the two measures tap the same domain. However, it does suggest that the disruption of women's customary support networks -- the loss of kin as a resource consequent to the move to the United States -- may have positive consequences for women, where the tendency of men to center their support system on peers may have negative consequences, in that it restricts the breadth of the helping networks established in the new context.

Put simply, these results indicate for this group that those best equipped for the demands of accommodation and adjustment to American graduate study are those most individually oriented toward personal achievement. Orientation toward group achievement is of consequence only to the extent that men's substantial peer orientation restricts their range of contact and consequently the resources available to them.

This study suggests, therefore, that while individuals may perceive achievement striving to have negative consequences for the maintenance of friendship and other affiliative attachments, the primary predictor of successful accommodation to high, individualized achievement norms is the strength of an individual's underlying achievement motivation. Maintenance of a strong support network may in fact <u>enhance</u> achievement striving by providing both socio-emotional support and assistance with specific problems. Women's ambivalence toward achievement, if this indeed an appropriate characterization of the phenonomenon, may therefore reflect not fear of loss of affiliation but the deprivation of this type of support

so many women experience as they move into new areas of achievement and competition.

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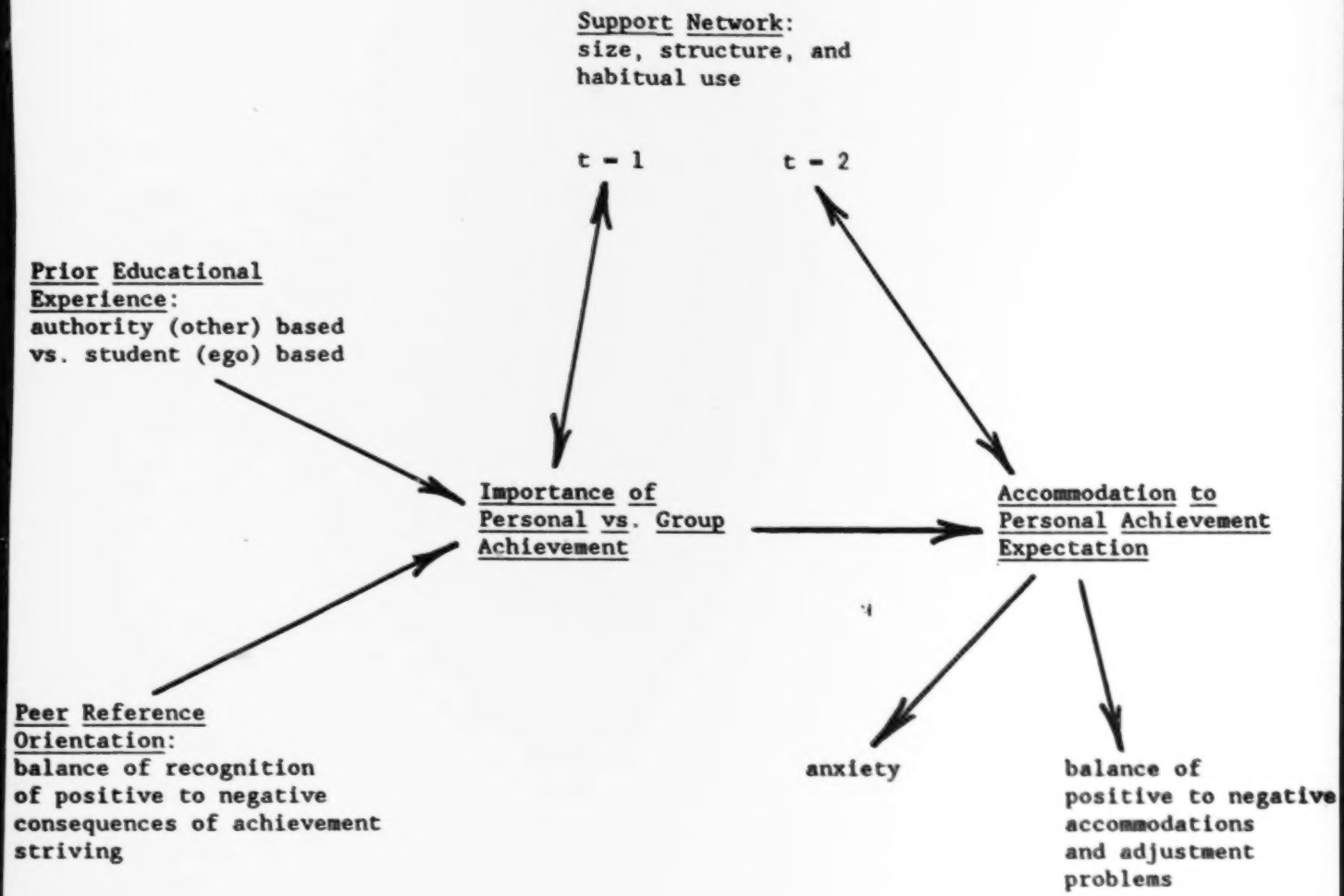

Figure 1 Conceptual Model